



THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Developed and developing countries alike have recognized the importance of girls' education, the worldwide surge in girls' primary school enrolment over the past two decades is testament to their commitment. The growth in girls' schooling also coincides with the global trend toward mass education that took off after the end of World War II and accelerated in the postcolonial period. Over the past 60 years, most countries have adopted mass education and have accelerated school expansion to accommodate the growing demand for education. Particular attention has been given to girls' schooling, not only because of its importance in reaching universal education but also because of its demonstrated social benefits.

India's recent economic growth rates have generated much optimism about its general social and economic development. But has there been accompanying progress in indicators of girl's educational outcomes even when all the resources are provided?

In an exhaustive survey, this paper tries to unearth the status of women, attitude towards girls' education in society, problems hindering the education of women, the importance of marriage in women's life affecting education as well as the empowerment of women for harassment. The article also highlights that educated and economically empowered women have said a firm "no" to the prevalent malice of the dowry, thus directly bearing the fruit of economic empowerment in society. Finally some recommendations have been made to eradicate the practice of intra-household and social discrimination of girl child and women.

KEY WORDS: Social change, rural education, caste discrimination, dowry.

INTRODUCTION:

The empowerment of women in India has been obstructed for centuries owing to various reasons amongst which the initial blow was in the form of depriving women from basic educational facilities. Beginning with the Rig Vedic period (Singh, 2004) Indian women were denied political powers. The denial of many basic rights continued to plunge downward during the later Vedic period, with further plummeting through forthcoming centuries. During the eighteenth century women suffered from several handicaps like female infanticide, sati, purdah, child marriage, illiteracy and subsequently forced child widowhood in the 9th century. Women were treated no better than domestic animals. Moved by this extreme plight, great social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, M.G. Ranade, D.K. Karve and Mahatma Gandhi were in the forefront, fighting against social atrocities toward women (Jha and Puri, 1998).

Women discovered their own potential and played an equal part in India's struggle for freedom (Barua, 2003). Many women came to be accepted as great patriots in their own rights. The freedom struggle of India was the platform where women again proved themselves. Women's participation in the revolutionary movement (Mehta, 2004) was significant even when they were deprived of basic human rights in men's world. The list of women in India who contributed to the movement for equality is enormous. To name just a few, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Vijaylaxmi Pundit, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Rajkumari Arm-it Kaur took up the fight on several fronts. (Jha and poojary, 1998)

RURAL EDUCATION IN INDIA:

Following independence, India viewed education as an effective tool for bringing social change through community development. The administrative control was effectively initiated in the 1950s, when, in 1952, the government grouped villages under Community Development Block, an authority under national programme which could control education in up to 100 villages. A Block Development Officer oversaw a geographical area of 150 square miles which could contain a population of as many as 70000 people. The further division was into Individual-based, community based, or the individual-cum-community-based, in which microscopic levels of development are overseen at village level by an appointed worker:

Despite some setbacks the rural education programmes continued throughout the 1950s, with support from private institutions. A sizable network of rural education had been established by the time the Gandhigram Rural Institute was established and 5,200 Community Development Blocks were established in India. Nursery schools, elementary schools, secondary school, and schools for adult education for women were set up. The government continued to view rural education as an agenda that could be relatively free from bureaucratic backlog and general stagnation. However, in some cases lack of financing balanced the gains made by rural education institutes of India. Some ideas failed to find acceptability among India's poor and investments made by the government sometimes

yielded little results. Today, government rural schools remain poorly funded and understaffed. Several foundations, such as the Rural Development Foundation (Hyderabad), actively build high-quality rural schools, but the number of students served is small.

LITERACY AMONG WOMEN:

In independent India, illiteracy is the second most important problem following poverty. Female literacy rates are very low nationally. A look at the statistics relating to female literacy reveals a grim picture. Though the female literacy rate has progressively increased from 8.86% in 1951 to 15.34% in 1961 to 21.97% in 1971 to 29.75% in 1981 to 39.42% in 1991, it is still below the desired level (Maitri and Sinha, 1993). Comparing these rates to male literacy is 63.68%, it is clear that female literacy is neglected. This gap ultimately contributes to the subordination of women and greater dowry demand in the marriage market. Among the literate women only a handful of women obtain their education in order to acquire economic independence; for the majority, literate women receive an education only to become more eligible in for marriage (Johnson and Johnson, 2001). The link between female literacy rates and development is obvious and has received much attention in the development literature. For example, Rajasthan, which has a very low female literacy rate, is still burdened with widespread practices like, sati? (Female foeticide and child-marriage. On the other hand, Kerala, which has a high female literacy rate, is almost devoid of all these practices except the practice of dowry. Although the government has undertaken many programmes for the development of women, and in spite of the equality of status guaranteed under the Indian Constitution, double standards prevail in every sector of society and in the crucial sectors of health, education and social development. Moreover, the social isolation of women contributes to the deterioration of their condition. In spite of the Indian Government's effort to secure justice for women through laws against crimes, the result is far from satisfactory. Without proper education, legal literacy and social awareness it is impossible to elevate the status of women.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Women discovered their own potential and played an equal part in India's struggle for freedom. Many women came to be accepted as great patriots in their own rights. The freedom struggle of India was the platform where women again proved themselves (Bajpai, Nirupam and Jeffrey Sachs, 2000).

Among the literate women only a handful of women obtain their education in order to acquire economic independence; for the majority, literate women receive an education only to become more eligible in for marriage (Hirway Indira and Darshini Mahadevia, 2005).

Even though, after independence, considerable developments have taken place in the lives of women, there remains a bleak picture. A majority of women are still underprivileged in a tradition bound society like ours, where there is a distinction between lawful legitimacy and general practice. "In spite of women's contribution towards family income, their position in the family hierarchy mostly

remains subordinate" (Dreze, Jean and Aparajita Goyal, 2003).

METHODOLOGY:

Personal interviews were conducted to find out the role of education in empowering women. Questionnaire method was also used to collect the data, which was then tabulated in excel. Thus, survey and case study method is used.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS:

Information from both the rural and urban areas of Baramati district was collected. There were 26% semi-urban and 74% rural respondents. Respondents of this survey were from different economic strata as well as representing different educational levels. Some women who never had been to school and had no scope of education were also interviewed and constitute 6% of the interviewees. Among the women, 26% has primary schooling up to secondary education; 20% studied up to higher secondary levels. Undergraduates and graduates represent 27% of total respondents. Post graduates represents 11% while another 11% of respondent's educational qualification is higher than post-graduation. In addition, 26% were employed and 74% were unemployed. Among the employed women 70% were employed by the government, 20% were employed with NGOs and 10% were employed in small private enterprises.

The age at marriage of the respondents is also a very important factor, which indicates the status of women in society and their place in their family. In this survey it is revealed that a considerable number of women (32%) from lower economic strata (income Rs 3000/- per month) with very little education got married at an early age, on average of 14/15 years. The percentage of respondents married below 18 years are as follows 2.9% at 10 years, 2.9% at 12 years, 5.9% at 13 years, 5.9% at 14 years, 29.4% at 15 years, 41.2% at 16 years and 11.8% at 17 years. Marriage below 18 years is illegal and this practice of early marriage overburdens women with early motherhood spoiling their opportunity to get an education.

The economic distribution of the economic condition of respondents is as follows: the majority of the women (44.5%) are from the household earning up to Rs 3000/-, 18.8% up to Rs 6000/-, 12% up to Rs 9000/-, 12% up to Rs 12,000/-, 4.2% up to Rs 15,000/-, 3.7% up to Rs 18,000/-, 1.0% up to Rs 21,000/-, and 4.2% up to Rs 30,000/-.

SURVEY RESULTS:

(1) Priorities in general education: In Baramati district there is preference for boys in education and parents are accustomed to take their studies with more seriousness. The reason for this preference, as narrated by the respondents, is that it is the societal norm that boys must become economically independent. Families place the most importance on the marriage of their girls. When asked, some of the women the reasons for their illiteracy, they responded that it was because of their parent's negligence that they never had been to school. The same parents have, however taken many pains to send their sons to school. According to these respondents, their parents never felt the need for their girls to get educated. These women, a victim of their parental negligence, told that they feel very ashamed when they are unable to help their small children in their present educational pursuits. It is noteworthy, however, that a majority of the women (62%) expressed a keen interest in educating their daughters. So, there is a very positive change at least among women in Baramati district who are much more concerned about their daughter's education, when compared to their previous generation, as seen and felt during the survey.

(2) Problems affecting women's education: The findings of the survey show that even at the primary level of education poverty is the most significant factor shaping opportunities for women's education. Two of the elderly respondents mentioned that they worked as domestics to obtain their primary education. She and her sister faced severe economic problems as well as parental negligence in their childhood which deterred them from getting an education. Today they are extremely interested in educating their granddaughters.

Other problems which deterred women from getting an education, as cited by the respondents, are parental negligence and early marriage (Fig. 1). Responsibilities for the family or the death of mother or father also emerged as reasons for the compulsory dropout from school at an early age as girl children had to take care of their younger siblings. Many poor, uneducated villagers do not attribute much importance to the education of girls. Early marriage is another common feature leading parents to withdraw their girls from school, and once they are gone, very few girls return to school, according to a senior teacher. In a hurry to get them married, some girls fell into the wrong hand. As a result they have to suffer a broken marriage at a very immature age. Thus, economic problems are the main hindrance deterring women from getting an education, coupled with early marriage and parental negligence playing an important part in the ultimately deteriorating status of women.

(3) Education influencing the practice of dowry: As the results of the survey indicate there are few factors which can increase or decrease the demand of a dowry. One such factor is the economic empowerment of women. In the lowest educational strata, incidents of a dowry are highest and here the average

age of marriage is only 16 years. Respondents who were educated up to the secondary level married at the average age of 18; and those who had achieved higher secondary education married at the average age of 21. In all cases, incidents of dowry were also very high. (Fig.2). However, when the average age of marriage was 24, cases of a dowry came down considerably and the majority of women were married without a demand for a dowry. It is important to mention that graduated women who had economic independence constituted the group saying a strict "no" to dowry. So, it is revealed that economic empowerment enabled by proper education has a sizeable impact in the downfall of the dowry system in the, society of Baramati district.

Women educated up to post-graduation and beyond were inevitably found to be employed. It was observed that almost all of them were very confident and in control of their lives, reflected in part by a very high percentage of women refusing a dowry as a condition for marriage.

CONCLUSION:

Overall this study confirms that women's status is inferior to men in Baramati district. Women face discrimination within families as well as in society, where society maintains double standards in the case of education, marriage, spousal relationships, domestic violence, laws of patriarchal society, property laws, dowry system, sexual morality, sexual harassment as well as discriminatory social stigma and also less recognition and respect for women's work.

Managerial Implications: The survey indicates that prevailing intra-household discrimination in educational matters for girls and women persists. Therefore, a strong message needs to be conveyed in support of education and economic empowerment as equally important for both the sexes. Education emerges as the single most important parameter empowering women. Education builds the way for economic empowerment and uplifts the status of women. Reducing the gender gap in secondary and higher education should be the focus area.

Marriage only at mature, legal age is also crucial. Women should get married only after receiving an education or after acquiring some skill, which can make her economically independent. The survey suggests that there should be more importance placed on the economic empowerment of women. As women rise in economic status, they will gain greater social standing in the household and the society granting greater voice in important issues. Not only does economic empowerment fortify the position of women, it serves as a deterrent to dowries. The parental property should be distributed to sons and daughters on an equal footing so-the responsibility of looking after parents falls to all offspring. As women's economic power grows, it will be easier for them to take care of their parents, to become a respectable member of their natal family, and to overcome the tradition of "son preference."

Given these circumstances, the commitment to education of the village of Baramati and those, like it is truly remarkable. Families say they believe education will help their daughters "stand on her own two feet" and "have a bright future" and for these reasons they have made innumerable sacrifices. But due to the social differences, the families are not able to deliver the right value to the girl child

Government gives grants, supports financially the girl's education, but it is the villagers themselves who will have to work towards this "Social Taboo" of "caste discrimination", to enhance quality education.

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